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Pre-Face/

Pre-CARA

I belong to that generation of Chicano/a scholars who grew up during the Chicano Civil Rights Movement, too young to physically participate in the marches, strikes, boycotts, sit-ins, and blow-outs that characterized el Movimiento during the quaking sixties, but old enough to reap the benefits of affirmative action, bilingual education, and “minority” fellowships. I am also entering the academy at a time when the survival of Chicana/Chicano Studies is threatened as much by the external bureaucratic backlash against anything “multicultural” as by the internecine hostilities of a discipline unwilling to change its ideological and methodological guard. But, as I explain in my personal essay “Literary Wetback,” I am used to negotiating borders and contradictions. I was brought up in a Mexican immigrant, Spanish-Only, Catholic, middle-class, light-skinned family who deeply resisted assimilation and yet at the same time believed that

Mexican-Americans, or Pochos, as my family preferred to call them, were stupid. Not only could they not even speak their own language correctly (meaning Spanish), but their dark coloring denounced them as

ignorant. Apart from being strict, Mexican, and Catholic, my family was also under the delusion that, since our ancestors were made in Madrid, our fair coloring made us better than common Mexicans. If we maintained the purity of *la lengua Castellana*, and didn't associate with Prietos or Pochos, our superiority over that low breed of people would always be clear.<sup>1</sup>

I did not arrive at my own *concientización*<sup>2</sup> as a Chicana until my third year in college when I took one of the only Chicano Studies courses offered at the University of Texas at El Paso, taught by one of a handful of Chicana professors on the faculty. At the same time that I was decolonizing my mind through poetry and fiction, I was coming out as a lesbian. Eleven years later, as a doctoral student and teaching assistant in American Studies making waves about the ethnocentrism of the discipline, I walked into the Albuquerque Museum of Art and encountered the *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965–1985* exhibition, better known by its acronym, CARA.

Upon completing my three-hour tour of the show, I realized that, my doctoral education notwithstanding, I was embarrassingly ignorant about the historical and political context, the breadth and scope of Chicano/a visual art. Despite Art Appreciation, American History, and Political Science classes in college (all of which should have accommodated at least one pertinent section on the artistic, historical, or political developments of the Chicano Movement); despite growing up in El Paso, home of the original Pachucos and turf of La Raza Unida party; despite a five-year course of study on “American life and thought” (which treated matters of race and ethnicity, if at all, as tangents or supplements to the reading list)—despite all the knowledge I had gained on the road to becoming “Doctor” Gaspar de Alba, I knew relatively little of the political history and cultural production of Chicanos/as. Standing in the CARA exhibit, surrounded by this history and this material culture, I understood that in order to really “see” Chicano and Chicana art, I would have to make the exhibition the focus of an extended study.

In seeking to fill this “blank spot” in my education, which, as Alice Walker says, “needed desperately to be cleared if I expected to be a whole woman, a full human being, a [Chicana] full of self-awareness and pride,”<sup>3</sup> I saw CARA more times than I care to admit in Albuquerque, then traveled to see it in its last four venues: Washington, D.C., El Paso, New York, and San Antonio. I spoke with curators, museum staff and arts administrators, artists, art historians, academics, gallery owners, mem-

bers of the exhibit's different organizing committees, viewers. I collected viewer comments and three inches of press clippings on the show. I badgered the Wight Art Gallery to let me use the CARA archives for my research before they were even completed and traveled to Stanford University to pore through the personal papers of the two key organizers of the exhibition. I waited impatiently for the catalog, which was not released until a year after CARA opened at UCLA.

All of this exploration and immersion led me back to Chicano/a history and culture, back home to myself. In fact, I saw CARA so much that it became a home to me, a physical space, recreated in different venues, where I could see and hear the story of la Raza again. Names that didn't mean anything to me when I first saw the exhibition in Albuquerque became dear and familiar: Malaquías, Carmen, Yolanda, Rupert, José, Ester, Delilah, Harry, Juana Alicia, Carlos, César, Barbara. I disagreed with some, admired others, argued with a few, and slowly realized that this dialogue was part of CARA's intention: to open the doors to the master's house—the hitherto exclusionary space of the mainstream museum—to remodel the interior *al estilo Chicano* and create an environment where Chicano/a art could be the vehicle for dialogue and reflection. For the thousands of Raza across the country who had never felt addressed or represented in an art museum until CARA, the exhibition signified a personal and collective victory. They, too, were home for the first time in a public place. The old Mexican adage *Mi casa es su casa* was on the other foot, for once. The “white” house of the museum was now also a Raza house: *bienvenidos/as*.

This idea of home kept resonating for me with an image of a house from my studies in popular culture. Although I discuss this at length in Chapter 1, it is important to note here that the connection I made between the idea of being “home” in a historically inhospitable place for Chicanos/as and the idea of using a house to conceptualize the study of popular culture helped me to see that, in fact, Chicanos/as were not at home in the academy just as they were not at home in the art world. “Home,” say Becky Thompson and Sangeeta Tyagi, “is where people have gone to feel comfortable, to be with people like themselves, to be rejuvenated, to see a reflection of themselves in those around them.”<sup>4</sup>

The connection underscored my own invisibility as a Chicana. Not only was I seeing Chicano/a art for the first time in the master's house, I was seeing myself reflected in that art as well. Conversely, in my Popular Culture Studies, I was not being seen at all. Chicano/a popular culture did not exist as an academic category of analysis. We read about lowriders, to

be sure, and about *La Bamba* and *Los Lobos*, but this was all interesting “ethnic” stuff, introduced in the curriculum for the sake of diversifying the syllabus, lumped together with Alice Walker, Paula Gunn Allen, and Ronald Takaki under the classification of “subculture.”

The connection, finally, between the master’s house where Chicano/a art was currently installed and the house of popular culture where things “ethnic” were barely visible helped me to build an argument against the hegemonic and hegemonizing view of Popular Culture Studies, which subjugates the popular texts, traditions, customs, values, beliefs, and political identities of Other American cultures to subcultural status. Through this work, I arrived at the hypothesis that Chicano/a culture is an alter-Native culture within the United States, both alien and indigenous to the landbase known as the “West.” My conclusion, then, that *mi casa [no] es su casa*<sup>5</sup> signifies that while Chicanos/as are cultural citizens of the United States, neither the mainstream art world nor the dominant popular culture is a hospitable place for Chicano/a cultural production. Twisting the adage around even more appropriately, I conclude that *mi CARA [no] es su CARA*, for the face of Chicano/a art constructed by the exhibition, the face of Chicano/a identity, is both an insider’s and an outsider’s face, both present and absent in the discourse of American art, life, and culture. This book, then, is the story of how an alter-Native culture came to represent itself, to create its own face, within the master’s house. Gloria Anzaldúa calls this *haciendo caras*, which, more than making or creating face, “has the added connotation of making *gestos subversivos*, political subversive gestures, the piercing look that questions or challenges, the look that says ‘Don’t walk all over me,’ the one that says, ‘Get out of my face.’”<sup>6</sup>

The Introduction examines the theoretical framework of the study, a three-pronged approach that analyzes the aesthetics, politics, and methodologies used in my cultural critique of CARA and explores the contours of my social and cultural description of both the mainstream art world and the historical moment in which the CARA exhibition made its debut. In my analysis of the artworks and ideologies contained in the CARA exhibit, I situate the representation of this alter-Native culture within the cultural narrative of multiculturalism, which for a few golden years reigned supreme as the predominant cultural discourse of the academy in general and of American Studies in particular.

In Chapter 1, I deconstruct the ethnocentric paradigm of Popular Culture Studies by constructing a separate paradigm for studying Chicano/a popular culture. This chapter also takes the reader on an “open house” tour of Chicano/a art, history, and popular culture, briefly visiting the ten



rooms of the exhibition and reconstructing the architectural model by which to study Chicano/a popular culture.

The chapters in the second section explore CARA's organizational structure and politics of representation. Chapter 2 analyzes the making of the exhibition, the ideological visions underlying the show, the conflicts and contradictions between them, and the untraditional (some call it democratic) process of the exhibit's development. Chapter 3 carries the critique of the show's politics of representation into the gender arena. By juxtaposing the three separate *grupo* installations with the "Feminist Visions" gallery, I deconstruct the image of "la Chicana," as it was visualized and manipulated by the patriarchal tenets of the Chicano Art Movement, and its antithesis, "la Malinche," as it has been appropriated, subverted, and transformed by Chicana artists and Chicana feminists to construct a new theory of resistance. The chapter is an overt critique of the selection process of the exhibit which privileged those male interpretations of la Chicana, while at the same time using the work of Chicana artists to reproduce the sexist messages of el Movimiento.

Chapter 4 examines public reception to CARA through the analytical lens of Stuart Hall's reception theory, tracing the dominant, negotiated, and oppositional responses that the exhibit received in two domains of discourse: published reviews and viewer comments. Contextualized within three separate frameworks, the reviews and comments illuminate the Quality/Diversity debate that destabilized the mainstream art world in the late eighties; the "discovery" narrative of the Quincentennial that set the stage for a national exploration of Chicano/a art and culture; and the grateful, gratified, and resilient voices of la Raza, who for the first time felt not only represented in the public art museum, but also respected.

The Conclusion explores the multiple meanings and uses of multiculturalism in different registers of the culture industry and shows how CARA was, in fact, paradigmatic of the rise and fall of the "Diversity" moment. The study ends with an Appendix of selected viewer responses to the exhibition. Taken from three of the comment books generated by CARA, the responses tell a story about what it meant to those Chicanos and Chicanas<sup>7</sup> who saw the show in different parts of the country to have found la Raza filling the rooms and halls of the master's house.

Thanks to this most powerful, most stimulating, most prideful exhibit, I have gotten motivated to research more deeply into Chicano art, which, as a Chicana trained in Anglo schools, brought up by parents who denied any connections to Chicanos/Chicanas, I was

unaware of. *Ahora me estoy saliendo de la ignorancia. Gracias.* This show has moved my own resistance and affirmation. 4/27/91<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, the CARA exhibition has been a vehicle of *concientización* in my training as a Chicana cultural critic, permitting me to arrange pieces of three separate puzzles—Chicanismo, feminist theory, and Popular Culture Studies—into a hybrid, alter-Native methodology in the study of a face that is not your face, a house that is not your house.